

Message for September 17, 2017
Glennon Heights Mennonite Church
Betsy Headrick McCrae
Scripture passage: Psalm 103

From everlasting to everlasting

Last Sunday up at Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp Nathan led us in a worship service centered around Psalm 46: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. . . . The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” There is much upheaval in the world, Nathan said. And we are facing upheaval in our life as a congregation. This is disconcerting but there is nothing to fear. God is our refuge and strength. And we as a community provide refuge and strength for each other.

This morning as we begin a new church year, that is the message I want to reiterate. There will be a major change in the life of this congregation before this year is out. I will be stepping down as your pastor and you don’t know yet who will take my place. There is, understandably, anxiety about this among you. And a lot of grief on all our parts. The ground beneath us feels a little shaky.

Those feelings are very real. But even more real – eternally real – is that fact that our sometimes turbulent life and times are held solidly, unwaveringly in God’s embrace. Our human transience and vulnerability are surrounded by, carried in and bolstered by God’s steadfast love. We see this in the beautiful words of Psalm 103. “As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear God.” “The steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting.” As Paul says in Romans

8, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

But sometimes we forget that this is the case. Sometimes we forget that we are part of something so much bigger than us. And when we forget, we become anxious. We don't know how we will do what needs to be done. We don't know if we will make the right choices. We don't know how we will find the energy and insight we need to process things responsibly. We don't know if we as a community will continue to thrive. We worry about all this and become fretful. When we forget that we are part of something much bigger, we become myopic; we only see the uncertainty near at hand and it begins to have power over us.

When myopic uncertainty starts to overtake us, we need to get a grip. We need to stop and recalculate. We need to step back, look up and be reminded that we are indeed part of something wonderful and very big. We are God's people. We worship a God who is before, behind and beyond us, but also cares deeply about us. We worship a merciful God, a compassionate God, a God who at the same time is powerful, permanent and knows no bounds. Being reminded of this will re-center us. It will expand our view and comfort our troubled hearts.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all God's benefits.” As God's people, we are part of a plan with great benefits. Benefits which are always available and have no statute of limitations. And they're quite good. Life-giving, in fact. Let's look at the fine print:

Forgiveness is one benefit. Major forgiveness. Forgiveness beyond deserving.

Forgiveness that goes beyond the pale. “God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God’s steadfast love toward those who fear God; as far as the east is from the west, so far God removes our transgressions from us.” When we are forgiven by God, we are truly, completely forgiven. It’s hard to wrap our heads around the magnanimity of it. This is a major benefit.

Healing is another benefit as is redemption, or rescue. We call this salvation. God heals all your diseases, says the psalmist. God redeems your life from the Pit. “The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.”

And then there’s mercy. Wonderful gracious undeserved mercy. We are crowned with mercy. I picture mercy being poured over our heads, running down over our shoulders, covering every part of us. “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” When we receive mercy – which by definition is always undeserved – we are able to show mercy. This is a benefit which allows us to respond differently to our world.

We also receive the benefit of renewal. Renewal. This is the promise of a future. Something we need to take seriously right now. Bless the Lord “who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.” Now this doesn’t mean literally becoming young again. It doesn’t mean living forever. “God knows how we were made; God remembers that we are dust. As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.” We have our moment on the stage of life and then we move on. What the promise of renewal means is that the light we are carrying in this time and in

this place will never go out. Instead in God's care, no matter what happens, it will flourish and grow brighter. Who we are, who we have been, who we will be is held, protected, fed and renewed by our God whose steadfast love for us and for all the world is from everlasting to everlasting.

Sisters and brothers, as we begin this new church year which will bring great change, do not forget all God's benefits. We have received and will continue to receive forgiveness, healing, redemption, mercy and renewal. Our future is God's compassionate hands. In this we can trust.

I'd like to leave you with a poem this morning. It is printed on the back of your joys and concerns. You can follow along as I read it now and then take it home for rereading and reflection in the year to come.

"The Way It is," by William Stafford

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.

People wonder about what you are pursuing.

You have to explain about the thread.

But it is hard for others to see.

While you hold it you can't get lost.

Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.

Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.

You don't ever let go of the thread.

“The steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting.” Don’t ever let go of the thread. Amen.